



*Issue on Migration of Asylum seekers and refugees*

# **A Gaze beyond Categories: Who Are those Refugees and Migrants Anyway?**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper questions the analytical category of 'the refugee' and 'the migrant' and its attendant, dominant depictions in text and image. To counter persisting images, it suggests to shed light on the individual experience of people who are or have been on the move and thereby write people out of their predetermined status and into the center of academic research.*

**[ Keywords ]** : Refugee, Migrant, Storytelling, Visual and Textual Representations

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## INTRODUCTION

When I thought about writing a contribution to this journal issue about ‘Migration of Asylum Seekers and Refugees’, I was reminded of the image which has recently dominated European television screens: an ‘unwanted, threatening mass’ of people making their way towards the Mexican/US border. Distant shots of a decided forward-moving mass, bundled together into one homogeneous group, were once more intercut with military forces preparing to protect their nation from the upcoming ‘onslaught’, as US president Trump wrote in one of his tweets. Who those individuals - ready to leave their homes despite taking great losses - are, seemed to attract less attention. This imbalance, I believe, is where anthropology has to come into play and this is also, what I want to centre this paper on.

First I will briefly discuss the notion of ‘the refugee’, its implications when approached as an analytical category and the above exemplified standardizing discursive tendencies that dominate the representation of people who are or have been on the move, as worked out prominently by the anthropologist Liisa Malkki (1995, 1996). Through briefly sharing insights into my own PhD research, I will then propose that it is through an inquiry into the individual lives of people we work with that anthropologists can counter these often silent and distant portrayals. This does not only suggest a focus on the individual but also underlines the strength and uniqueness of the discipline of Anthropology, namely, to explore the human being in all its particularities.

### **Examining ‘the refugee experience’**

While migration studies have a long history within the discipline of anthropology, the emergence of the refugee as an analytical category was relatively new, as Malkki (1995) shows by providing an historical overview of the discipline of ‘refugee studies’. My aim here is not to summarize work in this field or to present its intellectual agenda, but rather to examine briefly one of its most influential concepts, namely that of ‘the refugee experience’ (Stein 1981). Proposing to examine the experience of refugees as a category, Stein sought to characterize refugee lives as passing through a more or less fixed sequence of stages, or ‘recurring phenomena with identifiable and often identical patterns

of behaviour and sets of causalities’ (Stein 1981: 321). Whilst recognizing Stein’s achievement to enhance ‘refugee studies’ as a discipline, I believe that the categorization of refugees into one ‘refugee condition’ not only renders reasonable the sealing of borders and the need to control movement, but also has real consequences in the everyday life of people who have crossed these borders, as one of my research participants, the 56-year-old Hamuda stated. It was only after working more than half a year alongside him in a small carpentry training centre in Brussels that he told me about his refusal to be part of a pre-given category that supposedly share similar patterns of behaviour:

*‘I came here as a refugee. I crossed the border with a fake French passport. But I usually avoid mentioning that. I normally pretend I was born here. Since I speak French that mostly works, I could have just been born in Brussels like many other people who have a slight Arabic accent... I don’t know why I felt like telling you now because once people hear that you did not come to Europe legally, they put you into a drawer from which it is very difficult to come out from. Either you are regarded as criminal or people start having their “pity look” and want to help. Of course, from then on, you cannot just continue having a normal relationship with people’.*<sup>1</sup>

By vocalizing his experience to be classified as part of a group, Hamuda does not only raise questions about the above-mentioned characterization. He also points at the two dominant images of migrants and refugees circulating in mass media – the ‘criminals’ and the ‘victims’.

### **‘Anonymous corporalities’ on screen**

The tendency to universalize ‘the refugee experience’ not only within academic writing but also in visual representation has been disputed topic within anthropology. Focusing on refugee movements, Malkki examines the ‘global visual field’ pointing out that refugees are far more commonly seen through photographs and other visual representations than they are read through the written word (Makki 1996: 386). By using the power of images, refugees become symbols of the spectacle of ‘raw human needs’, a ‘bare’ humanity that is portrayed through bodies visually aligned together into

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<sup>1</sup> Also see Moderbacher 2018.

a confusing mass (ibid. 390). This ‘anonymous corporality’ (ibid. 388), regardless of their categorization as refugees, migrants or asylum seekers, can be traced throughout Europe’s history, from the arrival of ‘guest workers’ in the 1950s, to visa queues in front of Sarajevo and Belgrade EU embassies over the period of 1996 – 2008 ‘as entrapment sharpened through Europe’s geopolitical reconfigurations’ (Jansen 2009: 830) to recent images of ‘dangerous masses’ ‘threatening’ Europe’s and North America’s welfare.

The standardizing discursive tendencies often portraying refugees and migrants as either a dangerous entity or a group of helpless victims in need of care does not leave space for individual action, desires and experiences. ‘It in no way helps one to realize’ to borrow from Malkki again, ‘that each of the persons in the photographs has a name, opinions, relatives, and histories, or that each has a reason for being where he is now: inside the frame of this photograph’ (1996: 387 f.). These name- and faceless entities do not only cause fear or pity, but also prevent the feeling of empathy. Empathy of course, as Frank (2000: 99) points out, can take many forms. In my understanding, though, it does go beyond the immediate sensation of a shared feeling but describes the ability to imagine other lives that rise from specific situations people are confronted with.<sup>2</sup> This ability alone of course would not solve problems but does, after all, precede solutions.

In addition, the distinction commonly made between refugees and migrants within these representations, according to which the former is supposed to have left their home region involuntarily whereas the latter have left by choice, is rather simplistic, as is the corresponding distinction between political and economic migrants. These distinctions are facile in a world where movements have ‘extraordinarily diverse historical and political causes and involve people who, while all displaced, find themselves in qualitatively different situations and predicaments’ (Malkki 1995: 496). To oppose free choice against forced movement leaves out important questions about the conditions that make movement possible and desirable for some and impossible for others. Media reports about ‘Migrants’ currently trying to make their way through Mexico, fleeing from

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<sup>2</sup> I am however also aware of the ‘dark side’ of empathy, as for example Bubandt and Willerslev have discussed (2015).

their home country due to increasing violence and lack of life perspective, offer a good example of the ambiguity and contrariness the term ‘free choice’ entails in these situations.

### **Writing people out of their ‘refugee’ or ‘migrant’ status**

In my own work, I am questioning the analytical category of ‘the refugee’ and ‘the migrant’ and along with it, how they are represented in text and images. By questioning these categories, I do not intend to blur, obscure or undermine the extreme hardship of displaced people, refugees waiting in camps for months and years around the world or living in the asylum system in state-sanctioned poverty and exclusion (as shown for example by Malkki 1992; Jackson 2002; and Lems 2018). But, following Malkki (1995: 496), I refuse to take these categories, of the ‘refugee’ and the ‘migrant’, as given. Rather, following recent debates on migrant and refugee labelling processes (Kibreab 2000; Fassin and d’Halluin 2005; Zetter 2007), I argue that regardless of the externally given category of ‘migrant’ or ‘refugee’, it is by focusing on the individual experiences of people that we can counter generalizing reductions and homogenizing depictions.

For my PhD Thesis ‘Crafting Lives in Brussels: Making and Mobility on the Margins’, I have conducted a one year field research in a carpentry training centre in Belgium’s capital Brussels designed to improve the chances of the marginalized population - mostly people with a migratory background – within the labour market. Taking this workshop as a starting point, I have zoomed into the lifeworld of two participants, Hamuda and Cise, who have come to Brussels from Tunisia and Guinea more than 20 years ago. The time I spent with these two men working with wood, talking about their life and walking together in the city they try to create a home for themselves in, has led to the creation of narratives that give voice to people that are far too often approached as analytical categories. They also counter the tendency to quickly group people into an appropriate set when the focus of observation is placed on humans, as Piette (2015: 4) has pointed out. With this, I do not mean to discard analyzations of social or cultural dynamics that have been most deeply and knowledgably explored within the discipline of anthropology. I rather want to underline what Piette has described as the ideal and the strength of an anthropology of existence, namely ‘to compare

humans as part of an attempt to consider the human, ideally presuming that the final comparison must be made as late as possible, so that at the moment of observation, the resulting collective perspective does not absorb individual singularity' (Piette 2015: 4).

## CONCLUSION

The stories of Hamuda and Cise written in my PhD shed light on how each of them – individually – crafts their life on the margins of a European city and how this is actually lived in the every day. Their stories tell about different borders they had to cross when coming to Brussels and different dreams they had to leave behind. Their stories tell about their individual desires and how each of them has searched for a home and suffered from losses along their path. Their stories are different in many ways. However, they both underpin that a person is much more than ‘a migrant’, or ‘a refugee’ and that the increasing presence of borders on our television screens is an everyday feature in the life of many people. Their stories also show that the ‘crisis’ for people crossing a border does not stop by crossing the one border but that there are many more borders and obstacles ahead. This certainly also counts for the people who will, sooner or later, reach the Mexican/US border. As of now, we do not know where their stories will lead, but I am convinced that as anthropologists we must continuously keep asking: who are those people behind the images?

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